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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with factors affecting Chinese English-as-Second-Language (ESL) learner's acquisition in the Department of Foreign Languages at Tianjin Institute of Technology. These factors, which include language shock, culture differences, culture background knowledge, motivation, and ego permeability, create psychological distance between the Chinese ESL learners and speakers of their target language. Other factors are individual differences, social factors, and self-consciousness. Suggestions for reducing psychological distance are offered. Chinese ESL learners need encouragement from their teachers and peers, teachers need to arouse curiosity about English-speaking countries and hold English activities to challenge ESL learners, such as speech contests and spelling bees. Teachers should also encourage projects, encourage excellence, and be supportive in correcting errors. Teachers should possess English language skills, professional competence, and devotion to their work. (Contains 10 references.) (JP)

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FACTORS THAT AFFECT CHINESE EFL LEARNER'S ACQUISITION

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with the factors affecting Chinese EFL learner's acquisition in the Department of Foreign Languages at Tianjin Institute of Technology.The author will try to point out how these factors could create psychological distance which will hinder Chinese EFL learner's language learning process,and try to determine why those factors have such an effect.Some other reasons will also be taken into consideration.To deal with those factors, some suggestions have been made,which have been proved to be useful,helpful and effective in the Department of Foreign Languages at Tianjin Institute of Technology.

1.Psychological Distance

While teaching English in China,I find that even within the same language environment,some Chinese EFL learners acquire their target language better or faster than others.Although everyone has the same innate processing mechanisms, certain psychological factors affect how much individual learners use each processor.The factors which create psychological distance between the Chinese EFL learners and the speakers of their target language are affective in nature.They involve such issues as the resolution of language shock,culture differences, culture background knowledge,motivation and ego permeability.

1.1.Language Shock

Nearly all of the EFL learners didn't have the real chance to have communication with the speakers of their target language.They didn't have the systematic training they needed in high school.When they came to our department,they began experiencing a completely new English language learning environment and having some courses by native speakers of their target language.Then they would be haunted by doubts as to whether their words and sentences accurately reflected their ideas or meanings.In addition,they are sometimes confronted with the target language words and sentences which carry with them images and meaning which they interpret differently than do native speakers of their target language.At the same time,the narcissistic gratification to which the learners are accustomed to in the use of their native language--Chinese,is lost,when they attempt to speak or write in the target language.Because almost all the EFL/ESL learners are underdogs,when they speak the target language,they have apprehension about appearing comic,childlike,foolish and they are shy,nervous,thus they are likely to

make errors and "they have high filters and so receive little input and allow ever less in."(Krashen P.263)

Therefore EFL learners should try to surmount the psychological obstacles as well as the cultural differences while learning the target language,which is also one of the aspects of psychological distance.

1.2.Culture Differences

Elsewhere in the EFL/ESL methodology literature,Rivers(1968)recommends that the strong bond between culture and language must be maintained for the student to have a complete understanding of the meaning of language.She believes that differences in values and attitudes are the main sources of problems in foreign language learning.Culture-specific values can be significant factors in comprehension if the values expressed by the speaker of the target language differ from the values held by the Chinese EFL learner. Some EFL learners have limited knowledge of the culture differences between their native language ano the target language.They find their problem-solving mechanisms do not work well in the target language learning;when they are used,they do not get the accustomed results.On the other hand,especially the freshmen have been used to being taught in the way of 'feeding the duck';thus they could not cope with the culture differences in the target language learning as well as the new learning situation in our department where they should rely on themselves in the language learning.I find that this situation causes psychological stress and anxiety.TheEFL learner who is uncomfortable in this situation is more likely to be lonely,frustrated and unhappy. The resultant mental state can produce a kind of syndrome rejection which diverts attention and energy from target language learning.Thus students are more likely to have difficulties in target language learning or to be unsuccessful EFL learners.Two dropouts and three unsuccessful EFL learners have been observed to have the abovementioned psychological problems in our department.

1.3.Culture Background Knowledge

As Coady pointed out,background knowledge becomes an important variable when we notice, as many have,that students with a Western background of some kind learn English faster on the average,than those without such a background.(Coady. 1979:7)

The role of culture background knowledge in EFL learning and teaching has

been often neglected.In our department there were no such courses concerned with the Western culture,history,politics etc.three years ago.But comprehending a text either spoken or written is an interactive process between the EFL learner's background knowledge and the text.Efficient comprehension requires the ability to relate the textual material to Chinese EFL learner's own knowledge.In recent years some measures have been taken to solve this problem:for example,the freshmen and the sophomores in our department have been learning English using the Communicative English For Chinese Learners by Li Xiaoju,which appeals to both the EFL learners and teachers in our department.They also enjoy some courses such as the Selected Readings of British And American Literature,the Introduction To Britain And The USA,and Newspaper Reading.Hundred percent of them say they like the CECL Core Course and the abovementioned courses as well.They do need such knowledge of their target language.

Comprehending words,sentences and entire text involves more than just relying on one's linguistic knowledge.But as matter of fact,nearly all of the Chinese EFL learners tend to have linguistic Knowledge emphasized because they were,they are and certainly they will be challenged by most of their EFL teachers in China.As a result,the role of background knowledge has been neglected.As Anderson et al pointed out,"every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world as well"(Anderson et al 1977:369).Because of this,when they listen and read,their listening and reading comprehension will be affected,and when they speak and write,misunderstanding may occur,for the same words or expressions may not mean the same thing to the listener and the reader of the target language.As Deng and Liu put it(Language & Culture P.2),because of culture differences,a serious question may cause amusement or laughter,a harmless statement may cause displeasure or anger.Therefore,jokes by a foreign speaker may be received with blank faces or stony silence.Yet the stories in the speaker's own country would leave audience holding their sides with laughter.Consequently,the EFL learner sometimes does not dare to speak to the native speaker of the target language or even his peers. He is afraid of being laughed at or looked down upon.The EFL learner,in attempting to find a cause for his disorientation and frustration,may reject himself and

the activities concerned with target language learning.He may try to avoid speaking with the native speaker of his target language or may even give up his target language learning.One EFL learner in our department was absent from school for long time,he was pretending to be sick. He did not speak with his peers or his teachers even in his native language.As a result,he failed in his study and had to leave our Institute.According to my statistics,5% of the freshmen in our department fail in their reading , listening and speaking.Ninety percent of them say that they have these kinds of problems concerned with cultural differences and cultural background knowledge.Ten percent of them report that they had felt rejection,frustration and stress especially during the first few weeks of the first semester.

I.4.Motivation

Motivation relates to the goals of Chinese EFL learning,in terms of psychological distance.The integratively motivated learner would seek maxiumum proxmity in order to meet and talk with the speaker of the target language. As Cardner and Lambert pointed out (1973),an instrumentally motivated learner would achieve a level of psychological solidarity,that would be only commensurate with his instrumental goals.Consequently,if the Chinese EFL learner's goal were merely instrumental,he might maintain a good deal of psychological distance between himself and the speakers of the target language.

The motivation of the EFL learner in our department is instrumental.What is more,according to my investigation,English was not their first choice.For 55% of them say their first choice was to go to some other noted universities or colleges for some specialties they were interested in.They had to come to our department because their first choice had been rejected;otherwise they would have to wait for another year for the entrance examination.Two years ago I asked 45 EFL students upon their graduation if they were really interested in their target language learning.Only nine of them gave me a positive answer.Most of them learn English for the purpose of seeking for good jobs in joint ventures to make more money or for improving their social status.Some of them chose English because of the pressure such as exams,going to further study,or the persuasion and encouragement from their parents,

friends and relatives.Some of them say they chose to study English because foreign language learning now is fashionable.The Handball class ,for example, say they chose English simply because they think English is easy to learn, and they might find good jobs upon their graduation.Those instrumentally motivated EFL learners cannot devote their time and energy to their learning. When they have some difficulties in their language learning,they are likely to be downhearted or frustrated;thus their language learning will be influenced.

Since all of the EFL learners are instrumentally motivated in our department, further analysis is quite neccessary.

1.4.1.Individual Differences

Some EFL learners believe since they have been admitted,there would be no use of hardworking because the 'Iron Rice Bowl' system does exist,which guarantees employment but kills initiative and therefore they would not study very hard.Some say the system of allocation of jobs is irrespective of their performance,therefore there is no use worrying about it so long as one has a good father or connection with someone who has some influence.Families can use their connection to find good jobs for their graduated sons and daughters. As a result,some of them are very lazy,spending most of their time dancing, dating,playing Majiang,cards or chess and even fooling around in the campus, Some go in for doing business outside or inside the school.Some of them have to cheat on exams indicating that they have little confidence in themselves and their abilities.As one of them put it 'Where there is a will,there is a way'.In fact their way of cheating is really sophisticated.Three years ago 5% of them would be found to cheat on exams.Cheating in our department tends to be down now for some measures have been taken.But it does exist and it does seem to be linked to the EFL learner's motivation.

Comparatively speaking ,those who want to apply for postgraduate study, pass TOEFL or GRE or win a scholarship or work in joint ventures,are highly motivated EFL learners and very successful in their study indeed.Recently because of some restrictions of going abroad,there is an evidence to show their motivation tends to change.

1.4.2.Other Reasons

Recently it has been very difficult for some undergraduates to find some good career simply because they are females.Seventy five percent of all the EFL learners are females in our department.In the past two years even the male students have been facing the challenge of finding good careers,except those who have connections.This has had a great impact on the learners at school especially those would-be undergraduates. Most of them are downhearted and even the highly motivated EFL learners have been influenced.Apart from this,social factors may also be taken into account.

1.5.Social Factors

Social factors may also create psychological distance.The learning and academic atmosphere of a class,a department,a university and even that of the whole society is likely to affect the Chinese EFL students' learning.The students know many people who have become nouveaux riches without receiving higher education.Some of them used to be their former school mates in high school.When the students are asked what they would prefer to do upon their graduation,eighty five percent of them say they want to do business rather than become interpreters or white collar workers.No one wants to become a teacher in the future.

1.6.Ego Permeability

Another source of Psychological distance may be the relative rigidity of the learner's ego boundaries(Cuiora,1972)Some experimental evidence indicates that people who have ego permeability,i,e,the ability to partially and temporarily give up their separateness of identity,are better second language learners.This essential psychoanalytical concept is intuitively appealing and provides another perspective from which the concept of psychological distance can be understood.Ninety five percent of the EFL learners in our department cannot partially or temporarily give up their separateness of identity,for their introversion has been preventing them from doing so.The rest 5% will belong to the extroverted learners who learn more rapidly and are more successful than the introverted ones.I also noticed that extroverted learners in our department find it easy to make contact with the speakers of their target language and other users of the target language,therefore they will obtain more input.Krashen ,(1981 a)for instance,argues that an outgoing personality may contribute to acquisition.The classroom EFL learner may also

benefit a lot from being extroverted by getting more practice in using the target language.I do find some EFL learners' improvement in their oral fluency and it is correlating significantly with extroversion and introversion. As one of the EFL learners remarked,"At first,I was very tense:A blank in my mind,being afraid of looking at the audience,legs trembling,later on,I felt better.I could look at my classmates from time to time,and thoughts came to my mind again.I hope this kind of traing would be continued"Yvonne, another EFL student also had the same feeling;"At the beginning,I felt very nervous and my foreign teacher also said it was very hard to catch my meaning. But after half year's training,I have made progress in my oral English and can speak comparatively understandable English in front of a lot of people. I think this improvement plays a basic part in raising my English standard".

1.7.Self-consciousness

Self-consciousness is very much related to EFL learning development.All things being equal,the self-conscious learner is more likely to be unsuccessful one.I believe that high anxiety levels and tendency to be introvert are connected with his unsuccessful foreign language acquisition.He is not eager to try new and unpredicable experience and is unwilling to guess before knowing for sure,and he seldom seeks out situations that require real communication in the target language.These EFL learners in our department have been observed to find language learning relatively dull and painful,and they learn the target language slowly.They have the disadvantage of fearing rejection or being laughed at.When they make speech errors,they are likely to be thrown into personal turmoil.They are inactive in class and when they have some problems in the target language learning,they tend to avoid appealing to authority(asking the native speakers).Instead they pretend not to have such problems. As a result,they may be possessed with an amount of problems which have been accumulated daily.The filter of the self-conscious learner has a smaller screen campared with those who are self-confident.In addition,self-conscious learners are hampered by the conscious operation of the monitor because they are so worried about how they appear.

They are the monitor over-users who monitor all the time.Monitor over-users are constantly checking their output with their learned conscious knowledge of the target language.As a result,they speak heisitantly,often self-correct in the middle of utterance,and are so concerned with correctness that they

have difficulty in speaking with any real fluency.There may be two causes for over-use of the monitor.Over-use may derive from learning without acquisition.Some one who had only formal exposure to a foreign or second language in grammar based classes may have little acquisition to rely on and may have no choice but to be an over-user. This is because of the fact that their previous learning in high school is grammar-based type and the Grammar-Translation Method is still dominating in the teaching field in China.Another type may be related to personality.These over-users are learners who have no faith in their acquired competence.Such EFL learners speak very little and speak slowly because they tend to try to recall and use grammar rules before speaking.

There are still many factors influencing Chinese EFL learner's acquisition such as aptitudes,class size,classroom climate,teaching style;for example, the EFL learner's previous experience or exposure to a particular teaching style is also a very important factor.The personality characteristics of previous teachers,especially those considered valuable by the learner,will tend to accustom learners to a particular teaching style.I observe that learners who are secure and independent,more flexible,with more self-insight,and better able to cope with ambiguity,tend to prefer nondirective and other less structured teaching approaches.I also notice that these learners who are generally insecure,accustomed to high levels of control,and when they are compulsive or from families where much control is imposed,they will be more insecure with the unstructured circumstances of a democratic group than they would be under a more structured autocratic teacher.

I believe that as some factors influencing Chinese learner's acquisition are dealt with,there may be some new ones.Factors affecting foreign language learning and acquisition should never be neglected.Successful teaching does not lie only in methodology of teaching,it also comes from many other factors for which they are many to be said and I have not even said them all.Without better understanding of the factors that influence the process of Chinese EFL learner's language learning and acquisition,it would be impossible for the EFL teachers to teach effectively even if they have better teaching materials or the best teaching pedagogy.In order to find some means to change the

unfavorable factors into favorable ones,in order to deal with those factors, some suggestions have been made,which have been proved to be useful,helpful and effective in the Department of Foreign Languages at Tianjin Institute of Technology.

2.SUGGESTIONS

1.Psychologically speaking,Chinese EFL learners need encouragement from their teachers and their peers,especially at the first stage of their learning.To motivate the learners,the teacher should help them define their long-term goals;give them the feeling that they can learn their target language well,i,e,please do not expect too much or too difficult from the learners at first;take special care of those less able and inactive or introverted learners by providing them with activities in which they could achieve success.

2.Teachers should try to arouse the learners'curiosity about the English speaking countries by introducing them with the different culture and the culture background knowledge.

3.Teachers should recommend some books and novels concerning language, culture,history etc. of the target language,which may help them feel that they are accepted and recognized.

4.Often hold English activities to challenge the EFL learners,such as Speech Contests,Spelling Bees,etc.They will also benefit a lot by taking part in English Week,English Corner.Lectures given by native speakers of the target language may help the learner understand the culture differences and enhance their understanding of the background knowledge.

5.Ask the introverted EFL learners to speak constantly in front of their peers or to be in charge of some English activities such as putting on some short English plays or chairing some discussions and seminars in their target language.They should be given many chances to talk in class especially those shy,nervous,introverted and field-independent learners.

6.The EFL learners should be encouraged to suggest some interesting topics to discuss,to do a project,to give feedback.Each activity should have a specific goal so learners will know when they are done and thus they will have

a feeling of making progress.

7.Ask them to devote most of their time to learning bothoutside and inside the campus.Encourage them to have a strong desire to surpass their peers,to have a strong strive to communicate with their peers and teachers in their target language.They should not be inhibited in oral expression.Difficult goals produce a higher level of performance than easy goals,but excessively difficult goals discourage performance. Specific goals produce more output than general goals such as 'do your best'.

8.EFL teachers should not be too fussy about the learner's errors,for making errors is also a process of learning the target language,and the learner should have a correct attitude towards making errors in their target language learning.So far as oral English is concerned,the more they talk,the more proficient they will become.If they make errors in their oral communication, they should continue speaking,provided no misunderstanding has been created.

9.A qualified EFL teacher must possess three basic qualities,English language skills,professional competence and devotion to his work,a key factor.If a teacher has no desire to do a good job,no teaching method can help him or her.He must be devoted to his teaching and as well as to his EFL learners.

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